

# Engaging civil society in the creation of sustainable cities

While sustainable development may be the new conventional wisdom, many people have still not grasped its meaning.

—Kofi Annan, Secretary General of the United Nations, 2002

By **Margaret Condon**

WE HAVE ALL HEARD THAT the Olympics are coming to Vancouver in 2010. However, in just a few months, from June 19 – 23, 2006, Vancouver will be on the international stage as it hosts the World Urban Forum. Why should we be excited, you say? Well, apart from the fact that up to 10,000 delegates from over 150 countries are expected to come to Vancouver for the event, it will mark the 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the landmark Habitat Conference that was also held in Vancouver in 1976.

## History

Habitat in 1976 was a landmark conference that raised global awareness of the importance of human settlement development and sustainability, and led to the creation of a new United Nations agency, the UN Centre for Human Settlements (now known as UN-Habitat). At the local level, particularly through the exhibition in the old hangars at Jericho Beach, it strongly affected many of the young people of Vancouver, raising our awareness of the poor living conditions and inadequate housing facing many of the world's cities and communities.

In 1996 a second Habitat conference was held in Istanbul. Then, after 2000, a biennial UN-Habitat event was established known as the

World Urban Forum (WUF). The first WUF was held in Nairobi in 2002, the second in Barcelona in 2004, and now the third—and expected to be the largest by far—will be in Vancouver in 2006. Recently Housing Minister Fontana, speaking in Vancouver, stated, “I believe the third World Urban Forum provides a tremendous opportunity to re-fire the idealism of the 1976 conference and remind us all of what is possible if we seize the moment and work together”.

## WUF and why it is important

The World Urban Forum provides an open forum—*registration is free and open to everyone*—for dialogue, networking, and generation of new ideas on tackling rapid urbanization and its impact on our communities, cities, economies, and policies. Compared to official UN meetings, WUF is designed to be informal and provide for the effective participation of non-governmental organizations, community-based organizations, urban professionals, academics, governments, local authorities and national and international associations of local governments.

The main theme of WUF 2006 is “Our Future: Sustainable Cities – Turning Ideas into Action” (see the sidebar on page 32 for other themes). In understanding the urgency to the

sustainability of our planet of taking action on urbanization, consider that in 1950 one-third of the then world's population of 2.5 billion lived in urban areas, whereas by 2050 it is projected that two thirds of the forecast population of over 9 billion will be urban dwellers and living in some of the poorest parts of the world. This gives rise to the startling statistic that poor countries will have to build the equivalent of a city of more than a million people each week for the next 45 years just to absorb the increased numbers!

Canadians are becoming familiar with some of the pressures of urbanization too, such as crowded highways, crumbling infrastructure, unhealthy air and water, and waste management. Too many Canadians are also experiencing homelessness or a risk thereof due to a lack of affordable housing. Canada will be showcasing its broader commitment to municipalities through the "New Deal for Cities and Communities" at WUF, and is also hoping to have its new Canadian Housing Framework finalized in time to unveil at WUF.

### **Role of SPARC BC at WUF**

SPARC BC has applied to host an official WUF Networking event under the social dimension dialogue theme of "Inclusion – The Right to the City". Our proposal, titled "Accessible Urban Space: A Facilitated Discussion on Inclusive Communities", will build on the findings of SPARC BC's Dialogue on Community Accessibility held in April, 2005. Whether or not we are accepted (there is much competition to host the 130 official WUF networking events)

SPARC BC anticipates holding a dialogue event in conjunction with the WUF in June, 2006. At this event we will explore issues around planning and design of the built environment, and how they impact on social inclusion in different cultural and economic settings. The needs of marginalized groups, barriers to equal access to urban space, and examples of good civic practices will be identified. Furthermore the dialogue will reflect on the importance of local citizen participation in the planning and design of accessible inclusive communities.

### **Local lead up to WUF 2006**

In the Greater Vancouver area, the "sustainability community" has been coming together under

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### **EARLY RESULTS OF HABITAT JAM**

As part of the preparations for WUF 2006, from December 1-3, 2005, a unique internet event was held that brought together over 25,000 people from around the globe to discuss and debate issues around sustainable cities. Canada, as the host country, put forward the idea of the on-line Habitat JAM as a key strategy to creating an inclusive WUF 2006. For 72 hours non-stop, everyday citizens, students, slum dwellers, subject matter experts, world leaders, and key thinkers shared their knowledge and ideas on some of the most urgent issues facing our rapidly urbanizing planet. While jamming herself, Mrs Anna Tibaijuka, Executive Director, UN Habitat, observed "The fact that the debate on slums has moved from the academic world to the streets of Nairobi, Dakar, Cape Town and Mumbai, Rio, Lima, and Manila is a powerful signal to world leaders on the need for concerted action." The results of the Habitat Jam will be analyzed and integrated into the agenda of WUF 2006. As well they will remain posted for your viewing through to June, 2006 at <[www.iamthejam.com](http://www.iamthejam.com)>

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the Habitat +30 umbrella group, for the purpose of organizing a wide range of events leading up to and occurring in conjunction with WUF 2006. In October there were two major launch events—a panel discussion on “The Sustainable City” featuring the Hon. Michael Harcourt, co-chair of the WUF 2006 National Advisory Committee, and Dr. Peter Oberlander, organizer of the 1976 Habitat conference, which launched the UBC “Living the Global City” series. There was also a Regional Vancouver Urban Observatory (Rvu) workshop and dialogue event led by SFU where over 100 citizens and profes-

sionals participated in the launch of a study group process to develop a set of urban indicators for tracking progress and change in the Greater Vancouver region, the first report of which will be presented at WUF 2006.

### **Legacy of WUF 2006**

It is hoped that WUF 2006 will focus the attention of national governments around the world on the urban agenda, and encourage them to take practical steps, particularly in the third world but also in Canada, to alleviate the living conditions of the urban poor and help pull them out of the cycle of poverty.

WUF also presents an opportunity to focus global attention on urban-specific issues as they relate to our local experiences, such as:

- Making compact, transit-oriented urban villages the predominant form of new residential development
- Creating incentives to kick-start the development of renewable urban energy sources, such as wind turbines, solar power, biomass conversion, and co-generation
- Putting in place favourable conditions for the pursuit of green architecture and building practices

To sum up WUF 2006 will provide a legacy of best practices, partnerships and networks, and hopefully focused leadership to the challenges and opportunities of urbanization—widely believed to be *the* great global issue of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Let's hope it also results in an increased interest in sustainability by the general public in Vancouver, and in B.C. and Canada. ■

### **THEMES OF THE WORLD URBAN FORUM 2006**

*Main theme:*

“Our Future: Sustainable Cities – Turning Ideas into Action”

*Sub-themes:*

“Sustainable cities: urban growth and environment”

“The shape of cities: urban planning and management”

“Energy: local action, global impact”

Sustainable Cities: Partnership and Finance

“Municipal finance: innovation and collaboration”

“Urban safety and security: taking responsibility”

Sustainable Cities: Social Inclusion and Cohesion

“Achieving the MDGs: slum upgrading and affordable housing”

“Public engagement: the inclusive approach”

### **WEBSITES**

**UN-Habitat World Urban Forum:**

<[www.unhabitat.org](http://www.unhabitat.org)>

**Canada World Urban Forum 3:**

<[www.wuf3-fum3.ca](http://www.wuf3-fum3.ca)>

**Habitat +30 Sustainability Community:**

<[www.habitatplus30.org](http://www.habitatplus30.org)>